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Council Communism Study Circle

Dutch/German Communist Left Study Guide

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Dutch/German Communist Left Study Guide
2021

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- Steve Wright. Revolutionary Traditions: Council Communism. 1991.

Introduction

A project of the Baltimore Libertarian Socialist Caucus, the Council Communism Study Circle met every two weeks from August 2020 until April 2021, brought together by an interest in exploring the ideas and history of the Dutch/German Radical Left. This tendency is criminally understudied and unknown within the left spaces that we often organize within, and many of us, after a summer both horrifying and hopeful, felt that we needed to learn more about a tendency of socialists and communists who took seriously the autonomy of the working class. We had active members from all across the country, from Baltimore to Atlanta to Cleveland to Seattle.

The following is intended to help share some of what it was that we learned and to provide a map for others who might follow us. If you are curious, if you have heard of a worker's council but don't know what it means, if you feel stifled by the rigidity of social democracy, we hope you'll take a look, find a group of comrades, and start engaging with these great texts.

Who Were the Council Communists?

Who were the council communists, where did they go, and what is it that separated them from the social democrats, the leninists, and the anarchists that they stand apart from?

Council Communism is one of the main currents of "left communist" thought. The left communists were the communists who, while often initially very supportive of the Soviet Union and the 3rd International, ended up breaking away and criticizing it from the left. Very often they came to this critique for different reasons, which makes putting them all under the same label of "left communist" problematic in a post-soviet world, where there is no communist "center" to be "left" of.

The Council Communists, then, as Dutch and German participants in the German SPD, were the radical left communists and socialists who saw the origin of the soviet, or worker's council, in the Russian 1905 Revolution as the most important development in the struggle against capital. They saw tremendous power in this expression of the autonomy and will of the working class as a whole, Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat (and importantly, not a party above the proletariat) made manifest. They started as a loose formation within the SPD, before forming the German Communist Party (KPD) after the Russian Revolution, which they saw as the advent of a real socialist movement building a council democracy. Refusing to collaborate with Social Democratic politicians and trade unions that had only months before viciously repressed strikes and outbreaks of the German Revolution, almost 80% of the KPD was expelled by its own central committee, almost entirely going over to the newly formed council communist Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD).

The scene is set. The council communists have gone from a few party functionaries to helming a rival communist party that initially dwarfed the "official" Moscow-aligned party. What set them apart? The council communists developed several lines of thought over the next several decades, including the following:

- A critique of social democracy: the left communists viewed the old SPD as hindering the revolutionary activity of the class with its heavy emphasis on leaders and centralization, which taught workers that someone else would fight for them.
- An emphasis on factory councils and industrial unionism: the left communists believed that workers' councils should replace the trade unions, and organize across industrial lines. To this end, they formed the German General Workers Union (AAUD), a national factory council organization modeled off the IWW.

- Gabriel Kuhn. *All Power to the Councils: A Documentary History of the German Revolution*.
 - "Introduction," Gabriel Kuhn. *All Power to the Councils: A Documentary History of the German Revolution*. PM Press, 2012. Pages xi to xxviii
- Paul Mattick, *Critique of Marcuse*. Herder and Herder, 1972, 110 pages
- Paul Mattick, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy*. 369 pages
- Paul Mattick, *The Masses & The Vanguard*. 1938
- Anton Pannekoek. *Lenin as Philosopher: A Critical Examination of the Philosophical Basis for Leninism* (1938). London: Merlin Press, 1975, 132 pages
- Anton Pannekoek, *Social Democracy and Communism*. 1927
- Anton Pannekoek. *State Capitalism and Dictatorship*. Raete Korrespondenz, 1936.
- Anton Pannekoek, *Class Struggle and Nation*. 1912
- Anton Pannekoek, *On the Communist Party*. 1936
- Peter Rachleff. *Council Communist Theory*. 1976.
- René Riesel — *Preliminaries on councils and councilist organization*
- Gary Roth, *Marxism in a Lost Century: A Biography of Paul Mattick*. Haymarket Books, 2015. 341 pages
- Root & Branch, eds. *Root and Branch; The Rise of the Workers' Movements*. Fawcett, 1975, 544 pages

- The Council Communism Reader. Radical Reprints, 2021. 342 pages
- Phillipe Bourrinet — The Dutch and German Communist Left —
- Serge Bricianer, “Communism and National Liberation,” Pannekoek and the Worker’s Councils. Telos Press. Pages 211 — 218
- Neil Fettes. Council Communism. 1999.
- Patrick Goode. Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism. Macmillan, 1979, 239 pages
- Karl Korsch. Marxism and Philosophy (1923, 1930). New Left Books, 1970, 177 pages
- Karl Korsch. Revolutionary Theory. Edited by Douhless Kellner, University of Texas Press, 1977, 299 pages
 - “Models of Revolutionary Practice,” Karl Korsch. Revolutionary Theory. Edited by Douhless Kellner, University of Texas Press, 1977, Pages 194 — 231
 - “Fascism and Counterrevolution,” Karl Korsch. Revolutionary Theory. Edited by Douhless Kellner, University of Texas Press, 1977, Pages 232 — 269
- Karl Korsch. Three Essays on Marxism. Monthly Review Press, 1971, 71 pages
 - Essay 1: Leading Principles of Marxism
 - Essay 2: Introduction to the 1932 edition of Capital
 - Essay 3: Why I Am A Marxist
- Karl Korsch. Karl Marx (1938). Russell and Russell, 1963, 247 pages

- A critique of the party form and an emphasis on class action: the left communists rejected the rigid hierarchy of the Leninist party model, and saw the dictatorship of the party as a perversion of Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat. This critique of the party form would lead to many councilists rejecting the party altogether, or theorizing the party as an advocacy group within the councils only.
- An analysis of the Soviet Union: The councilists saw the Bolsheviks as completing the bourgeois revolution in Russia, not accomplishing the tasks of the proletarian revolution. This would develop into the beginning of the “state capitalist” theory of the USSR.

In our syllabus, we attempted to include a cross section of the important texts from the movement. It would be impossible (and very likely not helpful) to list every single text by all of the authors involved in the movement. Instead, you will find below the syllabus for the 17 sessions that we used, along with suggestions for supplementary readings. It has been re-organized into modules and broken down into sessions, alongside some supplement and non-required readings to explore if something catches your eye or you would like more background. We hope that you find it helpful in your own research project.

All power to the councils!

Module 1 — Overview and Origins

Module One seeks to introduce the socialists who would go on to become the Council Communists, as well as give you enough of a framework to scaffold your future research. We’ve included a couple different overviews that all emphasize different aspects of the movement to help give a broad aerial view. This module also introduces one of Pannekoek’s big pieces, “World Revolution and

Communist Tactics,” one of the strongest early Council Communist critiques of the Second International.

We included quite a few supplemental readings that help put more of the Dutch/German Social Democratic Left in context. Feel free to explore these resources if you are more curious about how the future Council Communists came to differ from the Kautskyist Center.

Session 1 — An overview of the history of the Dutch/German council movement

These readings are meant to give a mile-high overview of council communism. They all emphasize slightly different elements of the councilist movement. Shipway’s “Council Communism” and Gerber’s “From left radicalism...” provide an introduction to the councilist conception of the “revolution as process”, as well as the role of consciousness and the revolutionary organization. Gombin’s “Council Communism” (chapter three in his spectacular book *The Radical Tradition*) instead focuses more on the history of the left wing of the SPD and the questions of federalism, entryism, and electoralism. Lastly Reeve’s “Thinking About Communism...” is a great introduction to the state capitalism/state socialism debate, along with the question of the law of value within communist society from a councilist perspective.

- John Gerber — From left radicalism to council communism: Anton Pannekoek and German revolutionary Marxism. 19 pages
- Mark Shipway. Council Communism. 1987. 15 pages
- Richard Gombin. Council Communism. 1978. 50 pages
- Charles Reeve. Thinking About Communism: Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution: A New Look at an Old Text. 2018. 14 pages.

What Comes Next?

The Dutch/German Communist Left asked many questions that are absolutely vital to our movements and the moment in which we find ourselves. After a century of failed parties devolving into NGOs at best and cults at worst, failed state socialist projects collapsing into fascism and market economy dystopia, and the marginalization of dissident communists, we think it’s time that we think seriously on the questions the Council Communists were asking.

What is communism? What is revolutionary consciousness? What is the relation of the communist movement to the Party, to anti-fascism, to organization and spontaneity and leadership and unions? What is needed from us when the revolutionary tide is crashing in, and what can we expect when it goes out to sea and leaves us stranded on the beach?

In the overwhelming tyranny of the present it can be hard to take a moment and grapple honestly with these questions, especially when so much is on the line. But as the heirs to the Party of Anarchy, as the class coming together for itself, we have a duty to ask the hard questions and grapple with our lack of easy answers.

We hope that you found this useful, and that it jump-started your own research projects. The long memory is the greatest weapon we have in the struggle against capital and the state, and we hope that in some small way we are keeping the flame of the radical critique of the Dutch/German Communist Left alive today.

Further Readings

These texts are all important resources for studying Council Communism, but are outside the scope of this group. They are absolutely worth engaging with, so we’ve included them here and we hope that you check them out when you can!

on industrial proletariat that characterized the historic left, ending with an emphasis on the historic mission of the working class to abolish itself as the basis for communism

- Gilles Dauve. Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement. 145 pages
 - Chapter 3 — “A Crash Course in Ultra-Left Ideology”, 10 pages
 - Chapter 4 — “Leninism and the Ultra-Left”, 9 pages
 - Chapter 5 — “Value Time and Communism: Re-Reading Marx”, 17 pages
 - Chapter 6 — “The Bitter Victory of Councilism”, 4 pages
 - Chapter 7 — “Postlude”, 11 pages

Session 3 — On failures

“When Insurrections Die” explores the ways in which revolutionary movements of the past century failed, from the attrition of interminable ideological and military conflict, or due to their “victories” taking the form of counter-revolutions themselves that fail to transcend capitalism.

- Gilles Dauve, “When Insurrections Die”. 55 pages

Supplemental Readings

The Castoriadis-Pannekoek Exchanges begin with a great introduction to the council communist movement Pannekoek participated in, and the neo-councilism of the Socialisme ou Barbarie group that Castoriadis was a part of, before including the several letters they wrote to each other clarifying their positions on the party question and the USSR.

- Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, Castoriadis-Pannekoek Exchanges. Viewpoint Magazine, 2011, 88 pages

Supplemental reading:

The entirety of Gombin’s *The Radical Tradition* is a great book and worth the read, exploring the long history of the socialist movement and its tensions between hierarchical and liberatory forms. The introduction to D.A. Smart’s *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* is a great introduction to the development of Pannekoek and Gorter specifically, and is a wonderful additional text for learning about the left wing of the SPD and the KAPD.

- Richard Gombin. *The Radical Tradition*. 1978. pages
- D.A. Smart, editor. *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, 1978, 176 pages
 - D.A. Smart, editor. “Introduction,” *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, 1978, page 7 — 49

Session 2 — Left Communism in Germany

Pannekoek’s “World Revolution and Communist Tactics” is a foundational piece. Written in 1920, it lays out the key theses of his beliefs about the role that communists play in their fight against imperialism and capitalism. The Group of International Communists’ “Origins of the Movement...” is a pamphlet from a later period laying out the history of the council communist movement and its organizations in the period during and after the German Revolution.

- “Anton Pannekoek: World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” D.A. Smart, editor. *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*. London: Pluto Press, 1978, pages 93 — 141
- Group of International Communists. *Origins of the Movement for Workers’ Councils in Germany*. 1938, 40 pages

Supplemental reading:

This following texts are important pieces from the left wing of the SPD, the Left Radicals. While Rosa Luxemburg was not part of the same currents as Pannekoek and the other Left Radicals, her work “The Mass Strike” was instrumental for their development. All four essays in D.A. Smart’s Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism are worth reading if you are interested in seeing the growth of two of the key Left Radicals. Pannekoek’s “Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics” would later be developed into his piece “World Revolution and Communist Tactics”, and it’s useful to read if you want to see the evolution. “Dutch Left Marxism in Formation” provides a view into the history of the left wing of the Dutch Marxists, where both Pannekoek and Gorter cut their teeth.

- Rosa Luxemburg. The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions. 1906, 71 pages
- D.A. Smart, editor. Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, 176 pages
 - D.A. Smart, editor. “Introduction,” Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, page 7 – 49
 - “Anton Pannekoek: Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics,” D.A. Smart, editor. Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, page 50 – 73
 - “Herman Gorter: The Origins of Nationalism in the Proletariat,” D.A. Smart, editor. Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, pages 74 – 92
 - “Anton Pannekoek: Afterword to World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” D.A. Smart, editor. Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, pages 142 – 148

munism” out of it and the Italian Bordigist current. His text Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement is a foundational text for his branch of left communism, communization theory, and provides insights into the council communists successes and shortcomings.

Session 1 — The New Left Movements

Chapter 1 defines communism in order to present a left critique of the currently existing socialist movements. Chapter 2 examines the French Left from 1968 onwards, and explores the ways in which the institutional Left had become a part of the development of capital.

- Gilles Dauve. Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement. 145 pages
 - Chapter 1 — Capitalism and Communism, 34 pages
 - Chapter 2 -The Class Struggle and Its Most Characteristic Aspects in Recent Years, 22 pages

Session 2 — Defining Left Communism

Chapter 3 provides a crash-course in the Dutch/German and Italian Left communists, in order to identify how they differ and how they were alike. Chapter 4 contrasts the Leninist conception of the Party with the councilist critiques of it, before highlighting the limits that the councilists failed to transcend. Chapter 5 explores Marx’s work on the Law of Value, and contrasts the councilists’ interpretation of it with Bordigas, before grounding the critique of capitalism in the critique of value. Chapter 6 explores the ways that the council communist movement crystalized into an ideology, councilism, and explores the ways that it was successful with its critiques as well as its limitations. Chapter 7 ties much of the book together, critiquing the economic-determinism and the over-focus

Supplemental Reading

“Pannekoek’s The Party and the Working Class” is a critique of a response to Pannekoek’s pamphlet that addresses some of the common arguments for a Leninist style party. “Revolutionary Marxism” is a short overview of Mattick’s understanding of Marxism, the structural logic of capitalism, and its implications for revolutionaries. “Workers Councils and Communist Organization of the Economy” is a critique of a Leninist program for socialism, that states clearly Matticks’ views on the party question as well as his critique of state-capitalism. It concludes with an argument for a council based movement over the party model, and does a good job at showing how the council communist critique was applied to other socialist programs. “The Barricades Must Be Torn Down” discusses the failure of the CNT-FAI to break from the Republic and their role in allowing the Stalinist counter-revolution within the Republic to advance.

- Paul Mattick, “Pannekoek’s The Party and the Working Class”. 1978. 5 pages
- Paul Mattick, “Revolutionary Marxism”. International Communist Correspondence. 1935.
- Paul Mattick. “Workers’s Councils and Communist Organization of the Economy”. International Council Correspondence. 1935. 16 pages
- Paul Mattick. “The Barricades must be Torn Down”.International Communist Correspondence. 1937.

Module 6 — Council Communism and the Communist Left

Gilles Dauve drew much inspiration from the Dutch/German Communist Left in his project to synthesize a coherent “left com-

- “Herman Gorter: The Organization of the Proletariat’s Class Struggle,” D.A. Smart, editor. Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism. London: Pluto Press, 1978, pages 149 — 173

- John Gerber, Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers’ Self-Emancipation: 1873 — 1960. 1989. 250 pages.

- Chapter 3: Dutch Left Marxism in Formation. 14 pages

Module 2 — Dialogue with the Third International

The Russian Revolution had a tremendous impact on socialists all over the world. Suddenly the Socialist Left was ascendent and everyone was looking for ways to emulate the Bolsheviks. Soon, Lenin and the Russian Communists came to exert a tremendous influence on the communist movement, and began weighing in to

Session 1 — The 3rd International Response

Lenin’s Left Wing Communism is probably the first place many of us heard the term, which is unfortunate. It is a classic piece of Lenin’s acerbic writing style, where he stakes out his criticism of left communist groups in Germany, Russia, and Italy. In all the examples he uses, he comes back to a central claim of the Bolsheviks: the problem of revolution is one of leadership of the class. Lenin lumps Pannekoek and the KAPD in with other tendencies that rejected key terms for being admitted into the Communist International: participation in elections and in the reactionary trade unions. Lenin’s belief is that the party must be hyper centralized around strong leaders in order that it may zig and zag around changing conditions, a policy many on the Left saw as opportunism.

Reading this is especially interesting after having engaged with many of the ideas that Pannekoek, Gorter, and the KAPD had been espousing. On one level it is an important text to read because it is a crystal clear example of the hyper political approach of the Bolsheviks, but it is also interesting to note the degree to which Lenin avoids engaging with the actual arguments the Dutch/Germans made.

- Vladimir Lenin. *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. 1920

Supplemental Reading:

The Terms of Admission into the Communist International is an important document for understanding the way that the communist parties of the 3rd International were being deployed as part of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. It is interesting to read these in the context of many of the council communists' critiques of social democracy to see the ways that the social democratic forms persisted under Leninism. "War and Revolution," specifically its first section, details the history of the so called "Zimmerwald Left" that both Lenin and Left Radicals of the SPD participated in.

- Vladimir Lenin. *Terms of Admission into the Communist International*. 1920
- John Gerber, Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation: 1873 — 1960. 1989. 250 pages.
 - Chapter 8: War and Revolution, 1914–1919. Page 108–112. 5 pages

Session 2 — Gorter's Response to the Bolsheviks

In Gorter's Open Letter, he lays out several strategic reasons why the Bolshevik strategies could not function in Western Europe.

Session 2 — Anti-Bolshevik Communism

"The Lenin Legend" is an analysis of the mythology developed around Lenin as the driving force behind the Russian Revolution, emphasizing that 1917 had many parents, and more importantly, that many of the failures of Stalin were logical conclusion of many of Lenin's programs and policies. "Spontaneity and Organization" explores the distinctions between the two ideas, as they are shaped by a capitalist "status quo" that exerts its powers and logics on the organizations and movements within it.

"Bolshevism or Communism" is a pamphlet responding to the Left Opposition's call for a new Communist International. It applauds the aim while criticizing Trotskyism for not having broken from the social democratic and Leninist basis for Stalinism. "The Party and the Working Class" is a short pamphlet rebuking parties as agents of the bourgeois revolution unfit for the proletarian revolution.

- Paul Mattick, *Selections from Anti-Bolshevik Communism*
 - "The Lenin Legend," Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 49 — 60
 - "Bolshevism and Stalinism," Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 61–72
 - "Spontaneity and Organization," Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 117 — 138. 21 pages
- United Workers Party of America. *Bolshevism or communism*. 1934. 18 pages.
- Anton Pannekoek, *The Party and the Working Class*, 1936, 5 pages

Grossman's crisis theory and Pannekoek's subjective understanding of the Revolution.

- Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, 248 pages
 - “Luxemburg vs. Lenin,” Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 19 – 49. 30 pages.
 - “Monopoly Capitalism,” Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 187 – 210. 23 pages
- John Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation: 1873 – 1960*. 1989. 250 pages.
 - Chapter 10: International Council Communism, 1917–1945. Page 169–177. 8 pages

Supplemental readings

“The German/Dutch Communist Left” explores the evolution of the council communists' critiques of the Soviet Union, culminating in the theory of “state-capitalism,” which saw the planned economy as part of the same process of monopoly and centralization happening in western capitalist countries at the same time. “Capitalism and Planning” explores the role of planning under commodity production, challenging common beliefs about capitalism economies as lacking plans or monopolies..

- Aufheben, *What Was the USSR?*. 2000. 292 pages
 - Part 3: Left Communism and the Russian Revolution – “The German/Dutch Communist Left”. Page 186 – 204. 19 pages
- Paul Mattick, *What is Communism?*. 2020. 230 pages
 - “Capitalism and Planning”, 1935. Page 33 – 80. 47 pages

Especially of note is that this is a piece from before the split had become permanent, and Gorter seems to take the position that Lenin is operating in good faith, but merely has incorrect information. His chief arguments are that the communists in the West cannot rely on the peasantry in the same way that the Russian communists could, and that the electoral and trade union tactics advocated by the Bolsheviks were a step backwards, not forwards, in the revolutionary fight.

- Herman Gorter. *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: A Reply to 'Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder' (by Lenin) (1920)*. Wildcat, 1989.

Supplemental Readings:

Pfemert's “Lenin's Infantile Disorder” is another prominent council communist's response to Lenin's, approaching the problem from a different direction. Pfemert was much more critical of the party form than

- The Council Communism Reader. Radical Reprints, 2021. 342 pages
 - “Lenin's Infantile Disorder and the Third International” by Franz Pfemert, pages 207 – 227, 20 pages

Session 3 – Ruhle's Response to the Bolsheviks

Otto Ruhle was a member of the SPD and a representative in the Reichstag for the Party before the war. Eventually becoming a prominent figure in the Communist Left, he came to totally reject the party form altogether, seeing both it and the bureaucratic state capitalism of the Soviet Union as too similar to the state capitalism of Western Europe and fascist Central Europe.

“From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution” analyzes the Russian Revolution as fulfilling the traditional role of the

bourgeois revolutions (that is, overthrowing feudalism, introducing land reform, and introducing capitalism), and makes the case that the bourgeois social form of the Revolution is only capable of creating a bourgeois order. He closes with an outline of the General Workers Union — Unitary Organization (AAUD-E), its councilist structure and its program. In “The Revolution is Not a Party Affair” he argues against the rigid centralized and bourgeois form of the political party favored by the 2nd International and the new 3rd International, making the case that parties so organized are incapable of mobilizing the class as a whole.

- Otto Rühle. From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution. Socialist Reproduction, 1924. 67 pages
- Otto Rühle. The Revolution Is Not a Party Affair. 1920. 12 pages

Supplemental Readings:

Rühle’s “Moscow and Ourselves” lays out the differences between Russia and Germany that make Russian methods inappropriate for the workers. “The Struggle Against...” articulates his belief that state communism and fascism shared a similar form, and thus both must be resisted. “Otto Rühle and the German Labor Movement” is a biography of Rühle’s time in the communist movement, tracing the development of his thought over his career. The piece highlights his critique about the bourgeois and totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union.

- Otto Rühle. Moscow and Ourselves. Die Aktion, 1920
- Otto Rühle. The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism. 28 pages
- Paul Mattick, Selections from Anti-Bolshevik Communism

Module 5 — The Late Councilists

In this module, we explore the council communist works of Paul Mattick. An adolescent when the German Revolution broke out, Mattick cut his teeth with the revolutionary youth groups that cheered on the Communist left and supported their own campaigns for better conditions for apprentices through bank robberies and expropriations. Upon coming to the United States in 1926, he made an intensive study of Marx’s critiques of political economy and theories about capitalism, made all the more impressive by the fact that he stopped attending school at the age of 14. Mattick organized with dissident communist groups like the IWW, the Proletarian Party, and the United Workers Party; published newspapers and journals like Living Marxism, International Council Correspondence, and New Essays; and had contacts with important thinkers like Anton Pannekoek, Otto Rühle, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Henryk Grossman, and many others. His work was instrumental in maintaining the council communist traditions and critiques through the long retreat of the left, and allowed it to be picked up again by the radicals of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Session 1 — Monopoly Capitalism and State Socialism

“Luxemburg vs. Lenin” is a comparison of the politics of Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, with a focus on the National Liberation question, the collapse of capitalism, and the implications of the differences between them. “Monopoly Capitalism” is a review and critique of the book Monopoly Capital, and argues that its authors’ attempts to go beyond Marx to explain the tendencies toward monopolization are unfounded. It provides the council communists’ view of monopolization, capital accumulation, and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Section two of “International Council Communism” describes the debate within the Council Communist movement between the economic determinism of

- Anton Pannekoek. *Workers Councils* (1950). Oakland: AK Press, 2002, 254 pages
 - Chapter 2 — The Fight, 42 pages

Session 3 — Council Communism, Fully Formed (Part 3)

Chapter 3 breaks down the history and composition of the bourgeoisie of England, France, Germany, and the United States. It develops thoughts on nationalism, democracy, fascism, and national socialism from these perspectives in order to contextualize the enemies that the proletariat faces.

- Anton Pannekoek. *Workers Councils* (1950). Oakland: AK Press, 2002, 254 pages
 - Chapter 3 — The Foe, 61 pages

Session 4 — Council Communism, Fully Formed (Part 4)

Chapter 4 continues the analysis of the economic and political foundations of countries, focusing on Japan, China, the USSR, and India. Pannekoek thus contextualizes World War 2, and teases out the differences between the state communism of the Soviet Union and the state capitalism of Nazi Germany. Chapter 5 concludes the text by examining the role that the United States will be playing as the new hegemon in the aftermath of the war.

- Anton Pannekoek. *Workers Councils* (1950). Oakland: AK Press, 2002, 254 pages
 - Chapter 4 — The War (1944), 28 pages
 - Chapter 5 — The Peace (1947), 19 pages

- “Otto Rühle and the German Labor Movement,” Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. Merlin Press, 2007, pages 87 — 115

Session 4 — Councilists in England

Sylvia Pankhurst was a prominent suffragette and left communist who became a founding member of a left Communist Party in Britain. Her newspaper, *The Workers Dreadnought*, published a number of pieces very sympathetic to the Dutch/German communist left and critical of Lenin. Several of her pieces connect the worker-centric council model to her radical feminism, and emphasize the role of women in the revolutionary organization and new revolutionary society.

Her piece “A Constitution for British Soviets” is a model of what a council democracy could look like in Britain, and includes the remarkable idea of the Household Soviet as a method of organizing and mobilizing homemakers and unemployed women into the system of workers democracy. “Cooperative Housekeeping” is a vision of how council democracy could help free women from the drudgery of household chores and child-rearing. “Communism and its Tactics” is a series of articles explaining the council form and left communist strategy within the British context, and articulates the insufficiency of parliamentary and trade union struggle. Her “Open Letter to Lenin” seeks to make the case that in Western Europe, the task of the revolutionary workers is not to ally with the progressive bourgeoisie, but to break from them.

- Sylvia Pankhurst. *A Sylvia Pankhurst Reader*. Manchester University Press, 1993, 252 pages
 - “A Constitution for British Soviets”. *Workers Dreadnought*, 1920, Page 100–103. 4 pages
 - “Co-operative Housekeeping”. *Workers Dreadnought*, 1920, Page 104–107. 4 pages

- Sylvia Pankhurst. Communism and It's Tactics. The Workers Dreadnought, 1922, 32 pages
- Sylvia Pankhurst. Open Letter to Lenin. The Workers Dreadnought, 1922, 2 pages

Supplemental Readings:

Lenin's early "Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst" argues for the Bolshevik tactics in Britain, and helps provide background on what Pankhurst argues against. "Housing and the Worker's Revolution" explores the issues of urban poverty and housing by comparing the United Kingdom to the newly socialist Russia.

- Vladimir Lenin. Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst, 1919
- Sylvia Pankhurst. Housing and the Worker's Revolution, 1918. 18 pages

Module 3 — The Political Economy of Council Communism

The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution is an attempt to lay out a model for the construction of a truly communist society. It is a profoundly useful text for understanding the councilist critique of state capitalism and state communism. For a long time, the best way to read this was a copy of the First Edition available on Libcom.org, but in 2020 an English translation of the Second Edition became available, translated by by Hermann Lueer. The Second Edition came out in 1935, five years after the First Edition, brought in more up to date information from the Soviet economic experiments, and completely revised the original into a new structure. We read the First Edition in our pass through this syllabus, and unfortunately if you have the Second Edition, you'll have to use the appropriate list. For the purposes

on developing the subjective conditions of the proletariat. "Mass Action and Revolution" provides an overview of Pannekoek's political development between 1910 and 1914, building on ideas about revolution, defining mass action and imperialism, and his thoughts on the national question. Larry Gambone's "Cosmic Dialectics" is a great brief introduction to Dietzgen's work, and it a useful tool for people who want to know more about the philosophical foundation of Pannekoek's project.

- John Gerber, Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation: 1873 — 1960. 1989. 250 pages.
 - Chapter 2: Pannekoek's Methodology. 15 pages
 - Chapter 5: Consciousness and Workers' Self-Emancipation. 16 pages
 - Chapter 7: Mass Action and Revolution. 12 pages
- Larry Gambone, "Cosmic Dialectics: The Libertarian Philosophy of Joseph Dietzgen". Joseph Dietzgen, The Nature of Human Brain Work: An Introduction to Dialectics. Page 115–139 24 pages
- Serge Bricianer, "Preface: The Formation of Pannekoek's Marxism by John Gerber," Pannekoek and the Worker's Councils. Telos Press. Pages 1 — 218

Session 2 — Council Communism, Fully Formed (Part 2)

Chapter 2 describes the struggles that communist workers wage in their shops and their unions. Pannekoek develops the idea that workers' struggles are related to the current stage of capitalist development, and that the form of struggle impacts the consciousness of the workers.

and mature iteration of his ideas. The text lays out a clear analysis of the methods by which workers can struggle against capitalism, the social and historical trends of the various national bourgeoisies, and the role of the workers council in overthrowing capitalism.

Rather than starting with it, we held off covering this piece until students had the full context in which the ideas developed and of the movements it was responding to. We hope that this foundation helps students gain even more from the text, and preserves the living character of the Council Communist tendency.

Session 1 — Council Communism, Fully Formed (Part 1)

Chapter One of Pannekoek's text lays out the revolutionary tasks of the workers as they build a society where the producers have control over their product. In it he emphasizes that destroying exploitation requires destroying capitalism and the bourgeois ideological foundations like the Law, property, and the capitalist organization of production, as well as the spiritual dimension of capitalist power in the minds of the workers.

- Anton Pannekoek. *Workers Councils* (1950). Oakland: AK Press, 2002, 254 pages
 - Chapter 1 — The Task, 51 pages

Supplemental readings

"Pannekoek's Methodology" explores the synthesis of the work of Marx and Joseph Dietzgen that provides the philosophical foundation for Pannekoek's politics. It demonstrates that it is through the application of Dietzgen's philosophy of the mind that Pannekoek is able to give Marxism an answer to the question of how consciousness forms. "Consciousness and Workers' Self-Emancipation" demonstrates how Pannekoek's Marx/Dietzgen synthesis allowed him to develop a revolutionary praxis centered

of this group we'll only be covering a few chapters, but we highly recommend interested folks read the whole thing, it's worth it.

Session 1 — Introducing the Fundamental Principles

Paul Mattick's Introduction to the Fundamental Principles helps situate the text historically, and presents some of the common critiques as well as emphasizing its role as an initial investigation in answering the problems of building the economic base for communism. Fredo Corvo's "On the Period..." responds to many of the misconceptions and critiques it faces, emphasizing the value-form debate.

- Paul Mattick, *Introduction To Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*. 1930. 17 pages
- Fredo Corvo, *On the Period of Transition between Capitalism and Communism*, 2018, 40 pages

Supplemental Reading

The Group of International Communists (GIC) draw heavily from Karl Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" in their solution for creating a system of labor-time accounting, and as such is helpful to have in mind when reading their work. Jan Appel was one of the main writers of the text, and his piece "Memories" from 1966, offers some insight into his life and his revolutionary career. Part one of "International Council Communism" discusses the origins of the GIC and their relationship to Pannekoek.

- Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*. 1875.
- Jan Appel, *Memories*. 1966.
- John Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation: 1873 — 1960*. 1989. 250 pages.
- Chapter 10: *International Council Communism, 1917–1945*. Page 163–169. 7 pages

Session 2 — The Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution

Chapter 1 lays out some of the theoretical questions that the Communist movement must answer about production, and lays out the flaws in several “marxist” answers to economic questions. Chapter 2 dives deeper into contemporary marxist or libertarian socialist interpretations of communism, before returning to Marx and his “Critique of the Gotha Program.” Chapter 3 explains the formula by which the labor hours invested in a product can be made visible, and the importance of replacing wage differentials with labor-time accounting. Chapter 4 examines various economic critiques of labor-time accounting, and demonstrates how workers’ councils can use it to organize a planned economy from the bottom up.

- Group of International Communists. Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution. 1930. 69 pages (also available on Marxists.org)
 - Chapters 1 — State Communism or The Association of Free and Equal Producers, 24 pages
 - Chapters 2 — The Progress Achieved Hitherto in Defining the Problem, 14 pages
 - Chapters 3 — The Reproduction Process in General, 14 pages
 - Chapters 4 — Average Social Production Time as the Basis of Production, 14 pages

Supplemental Reading

“What is Communism?” is a short piece that explores labor-time accounting from the GIC’s perspective. It’s a great document showing quickly introducing someone to this particular vision of communism.

- Paul Mattick, What is Communism?. 2020. 230 pages
- “What is Communism?”. 1934. Page 1–32. 32 pages

NB — If you are working from the Second Edition of the Fundamental Principles, we recommend the first seven chapters, assuming you are not planning on reading the whole book, which cover much the same ground, but in a different order. Please note that the two editions do not line up neatly, so your group should choose one to be the version you use.

Second Edition edited by Herman Lueer

- Group of International Communists. Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution. 1935
 - Chapter 1: The Starting Points of the Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution. 10 pages.
 - Chapter 2: The Social Democratic “Revision” of Marxism. 28 pages.
 - Chapter 3: The Unit of Account in Communism. 12 pages
 - Chapter 4: Progress in the Formulation of the Problem. 17 pages
 - Chapter 5: The Libertarian Communism. 17 pages
 - Chapter 6: The Social Production Process in General. 3 pages.
 - Chapter 7: The Communist Production. 19 pages.

Module 4 — Council Communism, Fully Formed

Workers Councils by Anton Pannekoek is probably THE central council communist text. In it Pannekoek lays out the fleshed out